

**Wahidin, A., & Powell, J.L. “‘The Irish Conflict’ and the Experiences of Female ex Combatants In the Irish Republican Army: Power, Resistance and Subjectivity’. The International Journal of Sociology & Social Policy**

***Abstract***

**Purpose:** The fundamental purpose of this article is to critically explore the importance of the experiences of female former combatants during the Irish Conflict, colloquially known as ‘The Troubles’ and outline key moments of resistance for female political prisoners during their time at Armagh jail. The paper will situate the analysis within a Foucauldian framework drawing on theoretical tools for understanding power, resistance and subjectivity to contextualise and capture rich narratives and experiences. What makes a Foucauldian analysis of former female combatants of the Conflict so inspiring, is how the animation and location of problems of knowledge as ‘pieces’ of the larger contest between The State, institutions of power and its penal subjects (ex female combatants as prisoners). The paper has demonstrated that the body exists through and in culture, the product of signs and meanings, of discourse and practices.

**Design/methodology/approach:** This is primarily qualitative methodology underpinned by Foucauldian theory. There were 28 women and 20 men interviewed in the course of this research came from across Ireland, some came from cities and others came from rural areas. Some had spent time in prisons in the UK and others served time in the Republic of Ireland or in the North of Ireland. Many prisoners experienced being on the run and all experienced levels of brutality at the hands of the State. Ethical approval was granted from the Queens University Research Committee.

**Findings:** This paper only examines the experiences of female ex-combatants and their narratives of imprisonment. What this article clearly shows through the narratives of the women is the gendered nature of imprisonment and the role of power, resilience and resistance whilst in prison in Northern Ireland. The voices in this paper disturb and interrupt the silence surrounding the experiences of women political prisoners, who are a hidden population, whilst in prison.

**Research limitations/implications:** In terms of research impact, this qualitative research is on the first of its kind to explore both the experiential and discursive narratives of female ex-combatants of the Irish Conflict. The impact and reach of the research illustrates how confinement revealed rich theoretical insights, drawing from Foucauldian theory, to examine the dialectical interplay between power and the subjective mobilisation of resistance practices of ex-combatants in prison in Northern Ireland. The wider point of prison policy and practice not meeting basic human rights or enhancing the quality of life of such prisoners reveals some of the dystopian features of current prison policy and lack of gender sensitivity to female combatants.

**Practical implications:** It is by prioritising the voices of the women combatants in this article that it not only enables their re-positioning at the centre of the struggle, but also moves away methodologically from the more typical sole emphasis on structural conditions and political processes. Instead, prioritising the voices of the women combatants places the production of subjectivities and agencies at the centre, and explores their dialectical relationship to objective conditions and practical constraints.

**Originality/value:** This article is one of the first to explore the importance of the experiences of female former combatants during the Northern Irish conflict with specific reference to their experience of imprisonment. The aim of this significant article is to situate our critical analysis grounded in Foucauldian theory drawing on

theoretical tools of power, resistance and subjectivity in order to make sense of women's experiences of conflict and imprisonment in Ireland. It is suggested that power and resistance need to be re-appropriated in order to examine such unique gendered experiences that have been hidden in mainstream criminological accounts of the Irish Conflict.

**Key words: Imprisonment, Ex female combatants, Irish Conflict, Foucault, Power**

## **Introduction**

The fundamental purpose of this article is to critically explore the importance of the experiences of female former combatants during the Irish Conflict, colloquially known as 'the Troubles' and outline key moments of resistance for female political prisoners during their time at Armagh jail<sup>1</sup>. There is a relatively large gap in the research literature relating to a gendered understanding of ex-paramilitaries and experiences of prison despite an ironic wealth of information on The Troubles in the politics of Ireland. Hence, this article attempts to fill this gap by making critical intersections between Foucauldian theory, women's narratives and social practices in the carceral estate. The research impact of such qualitative experiences reveals original narratives that come from a 'hidden population' within prison. The research generates fresh and significant insights into the daily experiences of ex-combatants relating to confinement and the mobilisation of resistance. Such experiences also reveal policy fault lines for understanding gender and complex power relationships in the institutional domain of the prison estate. Whilst in recent years, feminists (Bosworth, 1999) have pointed to women's experiences of imprisonment as important and significant as men's incarceration; the huge gap in the research literature relating to

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<sup>1</sup> Armagh Prison was the only women's prison in the North of Ireland and closed in 1986. The women were transferred to Mourne House, the women's unit in the newly-built high-security Maghaberry Prison complex.

female ex-combatants during the Irish Conflict, reveals the impact associated with the failure of penal policy and that of the British State to address the human right violations that occurred to Irish Republican prisoners.

The article will situate the analysis within a Foucauldian framework drawing on theoretical tools for understanding power, resistance and subjectivity. The paper will begin by locating the field of study, contextualise the nature of the Northern Irish Conflict, drawing on key moments of prison resistance by former political prisoners, such as the strip search and the 'No Wash Protest'. In turn, the paper will highlight that within the space between oppression and resistance, power and domination spaces emerge in which the political prisoners can modify and transform the nature of the prisons power to punish.

## **Methodology**

The research methodology was primarily qualitative in order to elicit complex stories and narratives deriving from a hidden population in prison. Community activists, ex-prison groups provided contacts in which the snowballing approach was used. The main ex-combatant group had a database of contacts for former political male prisoners but there was not an equivalent for women. In the process of gaining access, contact was made with: *Voices: Republican Women Ex-prisoners Group, Tar Anall and Coiste na nIachmí*<sup>2</sup>. The latter responded in a positive way but felt that it would be difficult to find women who would speak about their experience. It was through

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<sup>2</sup> *Voices: Republican Women Ex-prisoners Group, Tar Anall Coiste na n-Iarchimí* are a network of Republican ex-prisoner organisations based in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Their work includes providing various services and a range of support to Republican ex-Prisoners and their families.

the other two organisations that access to women and male former ex-combatants/volunteers was gained. The 28 women and 20 men interviewed in the course of this research came from across Ireland, some came from cities and others came from rural areas. Some had spent time in prisons in the UK and others served time in the Republic of Ireland or in the North of Ireland. Forty-eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with both women and men former ex-combatants, 28 of the semi-structured interviews were conducted with women. The interviews were formal only in the sense that they were conducted individually in a separate room and were tape-recorded. In addition to the interview guide, specific interview questions under each theme to prompt the participants and served as an aide memoir, whilst at the same time keeping the interview running smoothly. There was no fixed order to the questions and the phrasing of the questions was not prescribed in advance, since this was dependent on the individual. Many experienced being on the run and all experienced levels of brutality at the hands of the State. Ethical approval was granted from the Queens University Research Committee.

In this article all the names of the ex-combatants and any identifying variables have been changed in agreement with the participants of the study unless they have stated otherwise. The participants could withdraw at any time during the study and confidentiality and full and informed consent was an important variable in gaining participation and developing trust among the participants. Such an approach was important with regard to validating the nature of the research with an hard to reach group (Grounds and Jamieson, 2003). A number of focus groups were held with the both cohorts and the women and the men had the opportunity to read, amend and comment on the process. The participants were provided with the semi structured

interview schedule and an envelope beforehand and they were asked to make changes and incorporate areas that they thought were missing from the interview schedule.

They were also given the opportunity to read the transcripts and make changes. The data was derived from applying grounded theory and participants were given the content of the analysis to comment upon. This process is more participatory and involves cooperation and collaboration by transgressing traditional power relationships between those who are researched and those conducting the research (Galtung, 1975). It allowed ex-combatants as much ownership over the material, so 'the issue of what [was to] be disclosed [remains] under the control of the interviewee' (Jamieson and Grounds, 2002:10). It enabled *a priori* assumptions to be challenged reflecting the participants' experiences rather than mine (Roseneil, 1995).

This article only examines the experiences of female ex-combatants and their experiences of imprisonment. What this article clearly illustrates through the narratives of the women is the gendered nature of imprisonment and the role of resilience, resistance whilst in prison in Northern Ireland. The voices in this paper disturb and interrupt the silence surrounding the experiences of women political prisoners whilst in prison.

### **The Troubles, Women's Struggles and Imprisonment in the Irish Conflict**

There is an important contextual political backdrop before the paper examines and explores such important and significant narratives. In 1964, *The Campaign for Social Justice* was formed to address the discriminatory practices against Catholics in the

form of employment, housing allocation, electoral boundaries and the over-use of stop and search on the Catholic population. A number of protest marches began to take place seeking to reform, not to overthrow the existing state.

The Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) and 'B' Special Reservists reacted to the demonstrations in a hostile way and in response to heightening tensions, the British Government agreed to the deployment of troops in 1969. Between 1969 and 1999, 3,636 people died in the Conflict, 2,037 of whom were civilians (McKettrick et al. 1999: 1477; Ruane and Todd, 1996:1), 247 women were killed since 1969, by bomb explosions and gun attacks and 36,807 seriously injured. Approximately, one in ten of those killed during the Conflict were direct victims of state violence' (White, 2015: 9).

Until the ceasefires (See key moments leading up to the ceasefires: 31<sup>st</sup> August 1994, 20<sup>th</sup> July 1997, May 2000) the "troubles" have continued unabated since 1969 when armed troops were called to respond to the escalating violence (Adams, 1986; McKearney, 2011). When this is added to the population count, which totals 1.5 million, it means that there are few areas in Northern Ireland that have been left unscathed (Wahidin et al, 2012; Moore and Wahidin, 2015).

Whilst this is an important political context, there are important theoretical issues that need to be documented. The concept of resistance is fundamental to interpreting struggle in prison during the Conflict. Friedrichs (2009), argues that to resist means to 'withstand, strive against, or oppose... prevent hinder, or stand against' (2009:7). It is important to acknowledge that resistance can include both active and passive behaviours derived from the accounts of the women. Resistance is presented and

understood as the collective assertion of the political status of prisoners, and by extension, the political character of the Conflict. In the prison context, it can be argued that while the material conditions within the prisons cannot completely determine resistance, they do influence, shape, and even contort both the operation of power and resistance.

As Scott (1985: 299) has illustrated, the parameters of resistance are also set, in part, by the institutions. It is not just that 'where there is power, there is resistance'. Rather, resistance and the exercise of power and knowledge are mutually shaping, defining, and changing in an ongoing dialectic. Further, 'uncloaking power relations is characterised to set out to examine the 'political regime of the production of truth' (Davidson, 1986: 224). The effects of the relationship between 'power' and 'knowledge' would include the tendency for power to be reinforced by the British's governments agenda, penal policy and the knowledge they collate on individuals and prison populations. As part of this process in relation to resistance, certain powerful voices increase their legitimacy, 'truth claims' whilst other voices become silenced and de-legitimised. Thus despite their engagement as female combatants in the Irish Republican Army and as resistors to state violence, their voices are notably absent from the literature.

There is a tendency to present power and resistance as binary opposites has been challenged by Buntman (2003:265), who suggests that power should be seen in its 'myriad of bodies' and 'ranges of operations'. She further argues, that this dialectic is not apposite but that 'the relationship between power and resistance is closer to a continuum than a relationship between opposites' (ibid: 267). Simultaneously, it is through the process of "historical investigation" that social researchers can understand

the present which aims at understanding Foucault's potential use of method to understanding social formations relevant to understanding power and resistance. If 'historical inquiry' is to be used, researchers should "use it, to deform it, to make it groan and protest" (Foucault 1980, 54). Historical critique should be used to shatter 'taken for granted' assumptions surrounding hidden narratives relating to Irish Conflict. The relevance here of Foucault's (1973; 1977) use of historical inquiry is to use 'history' as a way of diagnosing the present and current social arrangements relating to political imprisonment. Indeed, by the very historical nature of being a political prisoner, the ideology and shared cause provided female political prisoners with a meaningful social group and identity within which she could be identified and *by which she could identify*. This mitigated against the prison regime of individualising and isolating prisoners (Sykes 1958: 107). Political prisoners have historically asserted their status as political prisoners, and this is no different to the paramilitary prisoners in Northern Ireland who through their political actions fought to be treated as collective factions rather than as individuals. In Northern Ireland, since 1969, prisoners have organised themselves into paramilitary groupings with hierarchical command structures. Paramilitary prisoner groupings have had their hierarchies, functional responsibilities, norms and values, support structures and policing mechanisms. In the case of the IRA volunteers, they conceptualised the State as the colonial enemy, the struggle against which required a disciplined and organised community. Even when the actual organisation of that community is materially difficult, such as during the No Wash era when prisoners spent large amounts of time confined to their cells, the conceptualisation of themselves as *being* and *belonging* to an organisation, a nation or prison community and part of a wider struggle was itself an act of resistance. The politics of belonging in relation to political prisoners relate



directly or indirectly to self and or others' perceptions of what being a member in such a grouping or collectively might mean. The collective resistance process, and the sense of community formed, was to an extent, an appendage of paramilitary structures within which volunteers of the IRA they had operated while on the outside. Therefore, the concept of belonging is not about social locations and the constructions of the individual or that of collective identities but also about the ways these are valued and judged. In agreement with Elspeth Probyn (1996), as well as Anne-Marie Fortier (2000), identity is a construction in transition, always producing itself through the combined processes of being and becoming, belonging and the longing to belong. These combined processes are reflected in narratives of identity. Of course not all belongings are as important to people in the same way and or to the same extent. 'Emotions, like perceptions, shift in different times and situations and are more or less reflective' (Yuval-Davis, 2006). In the narratives of former ex-combatants they were willing to sacrifice their lives/ to be incarcerated/ to be interrogated in order for the narratives of their identities and the objects of their identifications and attachments to continue to exist during and after the Conflict (Wahidin, 2016).

### **Security, resistance and the body**

The women experienced new levels of harassment and violence and subsequently the female body had to be reinvented as actively resisting, the power to punish, thus restoring the political potency of political prisoners. In the context of a prison where other forms of resistance are narrowed and may become obfuscated by the isolation of setting (Scott, 1990), the body may move to 'the centre of a political struggle'

(Turner, 1984: 39). It is argued that the *violence* applied to the female body in a visible manner transformed the movement of time across the somatic surfaces of the female political prisoner's body (Bosworth, 1999). Thus acts of resistance have to be understood not only in terms of their location in power relations but also through their intended and received meanings. Indeed, through the voices of the women, the article will elicit how political subjectivities were constituted through political struggles, but also that there are many spaces of struggle through which people become political.

The voices of the women reveals that various manifestations of resistance, discipline and power do not in any way comprise an unchallengeable or unchanging system of control and domination (Scott 1985). As Willian Bogard (cited in Rhodes 1998:286) contends, 'discipline always creates gaps, spaces of free play which embody new possibilities for struggle'. Moreover, an escalation or intensification of discipline and control often results in the emergence of correspondingly extreme forms of resistance' (Rhodes, 1998:288). Foucault is highly relevant here and emphasises two important aspects of individual agency that counteract his critics. First, the victims of modernity's disciplinary power - the prisoners - can subvert the regulatory forms of knowledge and subjectivity imposed upon them. Second, while power/knowledge relations construct governable individual subjects, such subjects are not fixed to their conditions of ruling and do become agents of resistance to them (Foucault 1977, 1991).

Indeed, for some prisoners, resistance served as a bargaining tool and a means of resolving what Carter (2000:365 cited in Carlton, 2008), refers to as the 'crisis of visibility'. For others it served as a vehicle for self-expression or a way of venting feelings of frustration and desperation. For most, the act of resistance was a key component in surviving the prison regime.

It is within such a context that the prisoner's mind and body comes to form sites of struggle upon which the institutional dynamics of power and resistance are played out. Rather than preventing or limiting resistance, each strategy of discipline and control opened up new spaces, tactics, subversion and possibilities for prisoner expressions of resistance. These tactics served numerous and diverse personal objectives for the political prisoners, but above all they constituted necessary responses for resistance and survival within the confines of a securocratic total institution. In a similar context, Goffman (1968) wrote about how spatial arrangements of 'total institutions' operate to provide care and rehabilitation at an official level and capacity, underneath the surface. Such institutions curtail the rights of those within them despite resistance:

'Many total institutions, most of the time, seem to function merely as storage dumps for inmates ... but they usually present themselves to the public as rational organizations designed consciously, through and through, as effective machines for producing a few officially avowed and officially approved ends' (Goffman 1968, 73).

Unlike Goffman, Foucault's reason for wanting to study prisons, aside from its prior neglect, was: 'the idea of reactivating the project of a 'genealogy of morals', one which worked by tracing the lines of what one might call 'moral technologies'. In order to get a better understanding of what is punished and why, I wanted to ask the question: how does one punish?' (Foucault 1989, 276).

In drawing on key moments of resistance the No Wash Protest demonstrate collective resistance by the female political prisoners. Tied to this, the events that triggered the No Wash Protest, began with what was a normal day at Armagh gaol. The 32 women at this stage were on the No Work Protest. Events on February 7<sup>th</sup> 1980, signified that

life at Armagh prison had changed as tensions and the general harassment of the women by the prison officers were intensifying.

‘The atmosphere had already been developing to a kind of different level. The whole level of atmosphere of the prison was changing because of the loss of political status, and you’ve had hostility rising among the prison officers. You had vigorous searching you know, not only as you *came in* but when you were *going out*, and *going from* one wing to another and *all* that. So that was beginning to affect the atmosphere.

We refused to do prison work with the result that you were locked in your cell during the working hours”.

McCafferty writes, ‘before noon, all social workers, education officers and religious ministers were cleared off the premises of Armagh jail’.... A high ranking officer of Armagh prison came onto the wing’, and some 25-30 male officers were with him and formed a semi-circle round us’ (1981: 8-11). At this time, women in prison in the Northern Ireland and in England and Wales could wear their own clothes. The prisoners were told that there was a general search of their cells – prison officers were searching for: berets, black skirts, personal items of clothing that the Republican women used to create paramilitary style uniforms. The black clothing symbolised the women’s membership in the PIRA<sup>3</sup>. The women would wear these outfits to commemorate the loss of colleagues or in support of their male counterparts at Long Kesh / The Maze<sup>4</sup> during marches outside in the yard. A week before February 7<sup>th</sup>, the Catholic Church, refused to allow the body of a dead IRA volunteer, Hugh

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<sup>3</sup> The Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) is also known as the IRA.

<sup>4</sup> Long Kesh’ is also known as the ‘Kesh’, ‘the Lazy K’, ‘Ceis fada’ (the literal Gaelic translation meaning ‘long bog’). It was built on the prison site from 1975 and began housing prisoners from 1976. This new prison was based on eight replicated single-storey H-Blocks, built over three phases across the site from 1975 to 1978 at a cost of £32 million. The cellular part of Long Kesh/the Maze housed prisoners convicted of post-1 March 1976 offences (those without special category status). It is known as the Maze, the Blocks, the camp (prisoner terminology) or the Maze Cellular (official prison terminology). The H-Blocks were single-storey and there were eight of them. Each block consisted of four wings, each of which contained twenty-five cells, a dining room, toilet area, exercise yard and hobbies room; the central linking section held classrooms, the prison officers’ room, treatment room and stores.

Delaney, to rest overnight in the chapel. As his three sisters had been interned in Armagh, the political prisoners decided to hold a commemorative parade for him, wearing clothes approved by the prison authorities and improvised by creating an IRA uniform. This activity in the encoded world of the prison signified to the prison authorities not only the women's defiance to the prison regime: it reinforced their political status, collective identity as volunteers / soldiers in an army.

As one woman states:

So it was *all about us being soldiers*. It was about us being an army faction. We would always remind them [the prison officers] that *we were an army within the prison*, and that they had to negotiate and respect that structure as political prisoners. They [the prison officers] always thought they knew better and then they would *go up against us* and then you had a *game* of survival. You know, Azrini, it was just *a constant battle*.

The improvised uniform of black garments symbolised the women's membership of the PIRA and 'A Company'. The use of the uniform was crucial in reinforcing their collective identity, an identity that the British Government sought to strip from them with the removal of Special Category Status. As Eileen Hickey comments: 'It kept [the POWs] aware that they were soldiers. In Armagh you could feel so removed from the movement, from the struggle outside.

Another recalls:

'It turned out that the search was for all the uniform gear. They herded us all into what was called The Association Room. We were held there for hours until we were allowed back into our cells. After they had searched us, I mean, stripped us. They took everything that they felt was contraband. But as we [the women] started to ask to get out using the bathroom we were refused and the word quickly spread'.

'They could have taken the black clothes out at any cell search at any time, because they did that regularly. But no, they came in, and it was all men and it was a very unnerving time. Just for those gates to open and come in with full length riot shields and the hard helmets. They begin beating the women up and

throwing them about the place. I remember getting thrown over this big male screw's head on to the landing and when I looked up, X was standing over me and she had been shaking me and I was going "what's wrong?" and she went "you were knocked out. Are you okay?" And I went "yep" and I got up'.

In addition to reinforcing the political status of the Republican women, the paramilitary uniform contests the legitimacy conferred by the State to the prison officers as the official signifier of their own military-style uniform. For the prison officers to derive any power from the uniform, they must be part of a monolithic disciplinary field. Alternative legitimacies such as that established by the paramilitary uniform questioned the prison's power to punish. Thus it could be argued, that the politicised identity of the women seemed threatening to prison officials. The paramilitary uniform foregrounded the subject position of 'soldier' and in turn disrupted traditional gender roles.

The aim of the next section of the paper provides an critical example of how the women navigated and changed the nature of the strip search. It is here that they show strategies of subversion as they illustrate how agency is a practical accomplishment that can challenge, negotiate, or maintain power relations. Thus this work differs significantly from Cohen and Taylor's (1972), in that it demonstrates through the voices of the women, the gendered nature of disciplinary control, punishment and subversion. One must note also that Cohen and Taylor's work focused solely on men in a maximum-security block - 'E Wing' in Durham and they failed to integrate an in-depth discussion of carceral power, embodiment and corporeality upon gendered bodies. Furthermore, by inserting the voices of the political prisoners, we will show how the nature of the strip search was sexualized and an instrument of discipline.

‘Two wardresses walk in. They ordered you to stand up. They took off your clothes. They started by inspecting your shoes as you stood naked. They went through your panties, your bra, and every seam of every garment. Then they would go through your hair and inspect your vagina.

Nothing is more humiliating. And you are all alone in the cell’.

By entering the private realm of the prison their bodies at once become the public property of Her Majesty’s Prison Service. The bodies of political prisoners are interpolated as agentic weapons against the State yet conterminously their bodies become bearers of pain and suffering. This type of lived ‘experience’ of pain is amplified in the sense that it is objectified, made visible to those outside the person’s body. Thirdly, the objectified pain is denied as pain and read as power, (Scarry, 1985:12-15) which in the following description places the body in a continuum of systematic violence (Aijner and Abbink, 2000; Kelly, 1997, Fawcett et al, 1996) directed and operationalised by agents of the state.

The routine use of strip searches against prisoners, particularly female prisoners, means that ‘[s]exual abuse is surreptitiously incorporated into the most habitual aspects of women’s imprisonment’ (Davis, 2003:81; 2005). The State is ‘directly implicated in this routinisation of sexual abuse, both in permitting such conditions that render women vulnerable to explicit sexual coercion. By incorporating a policy of strip searching and body cavity searches into routine penal policy and practice - strip searches were part of the prison disciplinary tools. Female prisoners, experienced being strip-searched as a form of sexual violence of coercion (Radford et al, 2000; Riches, 1986; Stewart, 1997). Outside of the prisoner / prison officer relationship, the coercive removal of clothes would constitute sexual assault (George, 1992, 1993). A significant issue is the relationship between what comes to be normalised in the context of prisons and what is represented as aberrant (Carlton, 2000). Redefined as

sexual assault, the strip and / or cavity search constitutes one of several interlinked 'circuits of violence' connecting the 'ordinary' to the 'extraordinary' (ibid:62). The 'ordinary' is characterised by routine violence permeating all prisons; the 'extraordinary' extends the continuum of State violence to sexual violence to State torture. What this article clearly demonstrates is that, as Goffman has argued: 'total institutions disrupt or defile precisely those actions that in civil society have the role of attesting to the actor and those in his [her] presence that he [she] has some command over his [her] world - that [she] is a person with "adult" self-determination, autonomy and freedom of an action' (1968:47):

"They'd come into your cell to search your cell. They [the prison officers] would just totally pull the cell apart, and then you were told to strip and you wouldn't. Well I wouldn't. Most of us wouldn't.

So they then proceeded to bring in more officers to hold you down while they [the prison officers] took your clothing off and when you were completely naked you were then bent over and they would do an internal search of your anus and vagina, and all the while you're struggling and struggling and then you'd end up getting punched and stuff like that.

It's sexual assault. You know [the prison officers] when they [the prison officers] strip searched you they [the prison officers] are looking in your body cavities. Strip searches were horrendous, but very few of us ever talk about it then you know."

This process detailed above details the trauma of the strip search, which divorces the prisoners bodies from any known 'natural' norm or experience of the body to be found in society outside the prison. The symbiosis between prison discipline and political resistance culminated in a literal inversion of the body, in a dissected body turned inside out. Female bodies were somatised, re-territorialised from where bodies were not true to the self but were linked to where Self and Other come into contact and exchange affects. As the above reveals this form of sexual assault, used as a



weapon of war, inflicted on her body is a stigma, an internalised shame (Agamben and Albert, 1999:106), a mark in which the community does not speak about. Agambden (1998) in his discussion of *homo sacer* termed a state of 'bare life'. This is where a person is denied of all human qualities and rights and exists outside the protection of law in which the state creates a culture of impunity for the perpetrators. We argue that the examples provided in this article demonstrates that War intensifies existing gender scripts which then lead to gender-based violence that violates women's rights. As pointed out by Sparling (2012) the pervasiveness of these violations is dependent on the normalisation of the inferiority of women. If women are perceived as second class citizens they are more easily devalued, dehumanised and degraded during wartime violence. The next section identifies another key moment of resistance of the No Wash Protest in the history of Armagh where the women smeared excreta on the walls of their cells.

### **The Beginning of the NO WASH and living conditions**

The crisis started when the prison officers insisted on finding and destroying all the pieces of black clothing in the women's cells. It was reported in the Irish Press 9<sup>th</sup> February 1980, that 'paramilitary clothing and flags' were discovered during a search. The prisoners were moved to a different wing of the prison on February 13<sup>th</sup> with very few personal belongings. Mairéad Farrell<sup>5</sup> wrote (cited in McCaffery, 1981:28),

'within a week we were given back a few items of personal property - comb, toothbrush and a few photos of relatives'. They were housed in 'A' wing; two to an eight-by-twelve-foot cell with two beds, two pillows, two chamber pots, two plastic mugs and plastic knives and forks. In response to the rising public

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<sup>5</sup> Mairéad Farrell was the IRA Officer in Command in Armagh Prison from December 1979–1986.

awareness and concern for the women prisoners, the NIO<sup>6</sup> responded by publically stating that a number of women had been confined to their cells and deprived of toilet facilities, except for their 'slop-pots' [sic] (Irish News 8<sup>th</sup> February 1980). With the lack of toilet facilities, the cells' chamber pots overflowed'.

Initially, the women threw the contents out of the window, but the prison officers boarded up the windows. This led to the women throwing the contents of their slop-buckets out onto the landings and at the prison officers when they opened their cells doors. This was done to prevent the prison officers from throwing contents of the 'po' all over the cell when the women went for exercise (See Brady et al, 2012: 215). Once the women could not empty their chamber pots they resorted to smearing excrement all over the walls of their cells in protest. As a result Mairéad Farrell, the IRA commanding officer in Armagh jail, described the circumstances of the No-wash, as the women being: 'forced into a position of a 'dirt strike' as our pots are overflowing with urine and excrement. We emptied them out of the spy-holes into the wing. The male officers nailed them [the spy-holes] closed, but we broke them off using our chairs' (McCafferty, 1981:18).

A woman recounts that:

'There were no toilets in the cells in them days. It was a chamber pot and it'll only held so much, you know, and so we started pouring it out through the door but the screws came along and brushed it back into the cell'.

The No Wash Protest meant that the women did not wash their bodies, brush their teeth or wash their hair. The only natural light that escaped was from the cracks between the glass and the boards that were placed in front of the windows to stop the women from throwing the contents of their 'po's' onto the yard. Living in semi-

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<sup>6</sup> Northern Ireland Office.

darkness, with only one hour for exercise, the women would reach up to the windows to breathe what little air was coming through the space between the glass and the boarded windows.

‘We stood up on top of the bed and you climbed up to where the wee bit of the window was, and although they had it boarded up, there was still enough space that you could have shouted out the window’.

A.W. So you were in complete darkness then?

‘There was a light, but yes, the light was very, very dull. The cells were always dull and then if you can imagine the excrement all over the walls and ceiling. So yeah, it was pretty gloomy’.

Mairéad Farrell’s mother in 1980, wrote about the terrible conditions: ‘I think it’s inhuman that the girls are being forced to live in these conditions. I think it’s absolutely desperate that such conditions are allowed to continue. Mairéad says, the flies are terrible and there are some kind of fleas and other insects hopping about the cell’ (An Phoblacht, 1980).

Another woman describes the process of being moved so that their cell could be cleaned.

‘We got moved after three months to a clean cell and that’s when the flies came in. I think it was because the cells were all bleached down and they used ammonia to clean the cells out. You were moved in. Everything was wet. It was damp. It was the clean cells actually that had the flies and the flies used to actually be swirling in the middle of the cell. So you’d spend your first day getting rid of them. The strange thing was when all the cells were covered in shit, the cells very rarely had flies in it’.

The smell of the faeces was replaced by the potent smell of chemical detergents which encouraged flies to settle and breed. In this enforced move from one cell to another, the women would experience verbal and physical abuse forcing the women into the gaze of the prison officers. The cell movement symbolised a space in which the

women not only became visible but were vulnerable to violence and prison disciplinary control and power.

‘They [the prison officers] boarded up the windows and then they moved us across the ground floor in ‘A’ Wing and put us in the cells and boarded up the windows. It was easier to *control us*’.

In the beginning in trying to devise ways of surviving these new living conditions women found ways to deal with the revulsion of applying faeces to the walls of their cells.

‘We were so naïve and so stupid that we actually pulled the wardrobe out and stuck the poo on the wall behind the wardrobe and pushed the wardrobe back, thinking that if we can't see it, it didn't happen’.

Like the Republican male prisoners at Long Kesh who in 1978 embarked on the ‘No Wash Protest’, maintaining a level of cleanliness was equally as important to the women and this method of application not only reduced the chances of bacteria but also the smell.

‘We put our excrement on the walls because that way it smelt less. It dried up quicker and there was less chance of it turning into maggots.

A.W. So it is true, that the smell disappears once it's on the wall?

Absolutely, yeah. The urine smell actually was worse. It sort of never disappeared. Another thing that disappeared would have been body smells, for some strange reason. We thought they disappeared. I think we basically became immune to them. You never became immune to the conditions because it was *disgusting*. It wasn't where we wanted to be but we felt closer to our comrades in the H Blocks’.

The women described the cells as ‘*fetid*’, and they were not allowed to have a television, radio or reading material to break the monotony of the place, they also

found ways to subvert and reclaim the regime of isolation by writing and singing in Gaelic and writing political slogans. The act of speaking and writing in Gaelic was a ‘symbolic weapon of resistance in the wider struggle for national self-determination (Mac Ionnrachtaigh, 2013:42). By reclaiming the faecal cell and reclaiming the body through dirt, the women created a context of cultural separatism (Turner, 1984). This act divorced the prisoners from the sign systems of captivity.

The prison cell, already imprinted with a scatological writing of the political prisoners, relinquished part of its wall space to the graphics of Gaelic acquisition. The prisoners scratched their accumulated learning alongside the faecal matter on the walls. This transformation of the cell into a pedagogical space was as strong an act of personalised political appropriation as its defilement with excreta. Alongside the scatological history of domination, the prison cell now bore the secret history of language acquisition and of women before. The prisoners who were physically absent from each other, who may have never seen each other, were, present with each other through the cell wall. Thus the ‘use of the Irish language as a means of resistance had a ‘transcendental power’ that was’ first and foremost directed at the prison itself’ and subsequently transformed ‘the cell into a pedagogical space’ and an ‘act of personalised political appropriation’ (Mc Ionnrachtaigh, 2013:195) cites Feldman 1991: 216-17). The reading of old Gaelic graffiti on the cell wall by each new inhabitant and the addition of new inscriptions became an act of sociation and a means for reproducing knowledge that went beyond the disciplinary gaze. Thus transforming the prison space into a spectacle of alternative representation, meaning and political power.

‘Yeah, we all made designs. We drew wee flowers. We did flowers or we wrote “up the IRA” and we had “our names on the back of the door and stuff”. During the No-wash they wouldn’t let us associate and at one point the

only way to do it was to take the iron bed off the bottom part of the bed and dig it into the wall all night during the night until we all had holes from one cell to the next one’.

In order to make the cell conditions more bearable and make a tangible link with the outside world, the women also drew scenes of places outside that had a significant meaning to them. As one commentator suggested:

‘Their world was reduced to four cramped walls, within that tiny compass self was everywhere’ (Ellman, 1993:99).

The smearing of cells also represented an attempt to take greater control over space and territory, albeit within the limited confines of the cell, by prisoners experiencing extreme vulnerability to staff assaults. Resistance was enacted by re-territorializing space, in order to transform its meanings, to undermine territory and the power of the prison become a space of messages, covert communication, sharing lives with others but within the limits of the disciplinary gaze.

‘What would have happened was that ... you see when a cell was covered in shit, and even part of that, I mean after a while myself and X thought we can't live like this. So we would decorate the cells and we used to decorate it with lovely scenes of Donegal and we used to use the poo ... because our diet was so bad the poo was like hard crayons, you know what I mean? What a conversation to have, but it was, and we used to decorate everything from x - to Wonder Woman on the walls. So we used to have the cell decorated, and the smell was bad, you got used to the smell, you did.

## **Discussion: The Power to Punish**

The use of excreta and menstruation as a weapon of resistance against the prison was not, however, the only bodily weapon available to the prisoners. The No Wash was by any standard of political culture, and certainly by that of Ireland, an unusual political

action for women to participate in. However, the British national press, upon visiting Long Kesh and the men on the No Wash Protest for the first time, called it: ‘the most bizarre protest by prisoners in revolt against their gaolers’ and ‘self-inflicted degradation’ (Guardian and Daily Telegraph, March 16th 1979). It was an incomprehensible act to the general public as it was to prison officers and the British government administration.

The No Wash Protest provoked an inexpressible level of horror and during this period a rising spiral of violence inside and outside of the jails became more marked. If the men’s No Wash Protest was incomprehensible, for women it was unthinkable, generating in many men, even among the ranks of supporting Republicans, reactions of denial. It was no doubt a form of warfare, a violent contest of power, as Feldman (1991) has noted. But why this form and not another? Excrement was used as a direct critique of the State’s pretensions of homogenising the women and the ‘civilising process’ happening within the prisons. As Elias (1998) has argued, there is a link between the development of manners, and ‘toilette etiquette’ regarding the removal of bodily functions from a private to a visible public space (Edwards and McKie, 1996) and the evolution of the modern State. As in other closed institutions, in a context of limited options, prisoners fell back on using their own waste products as symbolic weapons against the assumed civilisation of the prison authorities and that of the British State.

As Aretxaga (1995: 135) suggests, the image of the prisoners living amongst their own excrement, menstrual blood and bloodied sanitary towels created an image of the ‘other’, the ‘uncivilised’, the fluid, leaky, unruly deviant female body, of which their bodies became dangerous, dirty and in need of control. In the women’s accounts

this movement from the hidden to public was not one of choice but became interpolated as the movement away from the ‘civilising process’ (Elias, 1978; 1982). While menstruation is an element of women’s lives, it remains hidden, and not talked about (Scambler and Scambler, 1993). Menstrual blood was no longer a marginal filthy substance but was central to political protest, politicising their existence in prison.

Socialised to see menstruation as ‘unpleasant’ and in some cultures as ‘unclean’ and polluting (Weidegger, 1975), the discourse of dirt was used to support anti-catholic sentiments. McEvoy, (2001:243), argues that: ‘it resonated with sectarian anti-Catholic discourses concerning dirtiness and immorality’ (2001:245). Peter Robinson, Deputy leader of Ian Paisley’s Democratic Unionist Party, wrote in a Democratic Unionist Party pamphlet published at the time stating ‘if cleanliness is next to Godliness, then to whom are these men [or women] close?’ (Robinson 1981:40).

The first sentence in McCafferty’s Irish Times article reads, ‘There is menstrual blood on the walls of Armagh prison in Northern Ireland’. Prisoner Shirley Devlin, a Republican from Newington who was twenty years old when the No Wash Protest began in Armagh, explained this particular issue: ‘A fee extra towels a month would help to combat the risk of infection. But no. Criminalisation and sanitary towels go together. Criminal means clean. Political means dirty, that is what they try to tell us’ (1981: 6). By rationing the number of sanitary towels allowed to each woman (some reports indicated that they were allowed a maximum of two per day), the male-dominated prison system was abusing the prisoners in an exclusively female way. As Fairweather et al note: ‘The fact that they had to sit in their own



menstrual blood amid excreta and urine did not concern the prison authorities' (1984:222). Their sole objective was to weaken these women and force them off the protest.

Many women were concerned about the long term effects as D'Archy (1981: 25) notes:

'I was most scared about possible vaginal infections, which quite a few suffered from. We never changed our knickers or jeans, but one had to have some protection there. Most of the women wore sanitary towels but there were no sanitary belts, so much of the time in the exercise yard was spent in furtively hitching the towels into place out of view of the TV monitors. The problem of not washing during menstruation was solved by changing the tampax much more frequently than one would outside. .. In the beginning you could get as many sanitary towels and tampax as you wanted. But then nurses came round and informed us that we were going to get them only on the first day of the month, and you had to choose between tampax and towels'.

But one which leads to a different type of pain suffering and torment:

B: 'Being on your period was one of the hardest times because it's such a private and personal thing. They would allow us towels. We were allowed something like five or six towels for the duration, regardless of what your period was like, and we just carried on as usual'.

The involvement of women in the No Wash Protest for the first time propelled women volunteers into the popular consciousness of the international community, even though they participated and died in armed operations and had been imprisoned in rising numbers since 1972. As news filtered to the outside world, the image of cells smeared with excrement and menstrual blood, used sanitary towels left-over food, the question had to be asked: Who are these women and how did they get there? Mairéad Farrell, leader of the women prisoners at Armagh Prison,

described in a letter smuggled out the fetid and squalid conditions they were forced to live in:

‘The stench of urine and excrement clings to the cells and our bodies. No longer can we empty the pots of urine and excrement out the window, as the male screws [guards] have boarded them up. Little light or air penetrates the thick boarding. The electric light has to be kept constantly on in the cells; the other option is to see out the window; our only view is the wall of excreta. The spy-holes are locked so they can only be open by the screws to look in. Sanitary towels are thrown into us without wrapping. We are not permitted paper bags or such like so they lie in the dirt until used. For twenty-three hours a day we lie in these cells’.

As the women rewrote the contours of the cell, The No Wash Protest simultaneously rewrote their bodies with a new and repellent surface of resistance. The faecal cell, which the prison officers tended to avoid and mainly entered to inflict fear and terror, also interrupted the women’s compulsory invisibility. In response to the deteriorating conditions the prison officers distanced themselves from the polluting environment of the faeces, smell, urine, food and sanitary towels. Menstrual blood, in many ways was seen as the ultimate form of danger and in turn dirt, and it was these ideas of being contaminated (see Douglas, 1966) that was particularly useful in warding off unwanted trespassers. Aretxaga, states that ‘prison officers felt defiled coming into contact with the prisoners. In the women’s prison of Armagh officers wore masks, insulating suits, and rubber boots that shielded them from the polluting conditions of the prisoners’ wing that protected them from the living conditions of the prisoners (Aretxaga, 1997:136).

The No Wash Protest resulted in the political prisoners being placed in permanent semi-darkness with limited communication with the other women. In order to survive the darkness, isolation and the inability to wash or use toilet facilities, they found ways to carve out spaces and create new meanings. In other words, the women

rewrote the individualisation of prison punishment by creating methods that reconnected them with others and the outside world. Pile and Keith (1997: xi) argue, 'these resistances are embedded in the 'politics' of everyday spaces through which identities are constantly in a state of flux'. The resistant identities opened up further possibilities, new landscapes and new meanings within the carceral walls were produced. Thus, the carceral gaze seeped into 'somatic surveillance' which is integral to self-surveillance, physical survival and subsequently the body becomes inscribed into the organisational body in which the women were resistant.

The No Wash Protest lasted 13 months, during which more attention was focused on Armagh jail than at any other time during the Conflict (Armagh Coordinating Group, 1981). The political prisoners inverted the structures of control and surveillance and created a space that paralysed the gaze of the prison officers and where menstrual blood became a weapon of political protest which created alternative spaces to resist the power of punishment.

In this study, the gendered body discipline developed in prisons has parallels throughout the broader disciplinary society. Indeed, the success of modernity's domination over efficient and docile bodies in prisons attest to Foucault's thesis that the human body is a highly adaptable terminus for the circulation of power relations, surveillance and normalization, are core to prison experiences (Foucault 1977).

## **Implications and conclusions**

Despite the existence of a very small body of research studies and campaign literature regarding the treatment of female politically motivated prisoners in Northern Ireland

(Brady et al. 2011; Corcoran 2006 Darragh 2012), women remain marginal in academic and first-hand accounts of the Conflict. Such accounts therefore capture neither the gendered specificity of their experiences or the complex interplay between their experience as gendered subjects socialised within a historically specific, politically shaped ethno-nationalist discourse of womanhood, nor their self-identification as soldiers in the struggle against an oppressive colonial state.

In terms of research impact, this qualitative research is on the first of its kind to explore both the experiential and discursive narratives of female ex-combatants of the Irish Conflict. The impact and reach of the research illustrates how confinement revealed rich theoretical insights, drawing from Foucauldian theory, to examine the dialectical interplay between power and the subjective mobilisation of resistance practices of ex-combatants in prison in Northern Ireland. The wider point of prison policy and practice not meeting basic human rights or enhancing the quality of life of such prisoners reveals some of the dystopian features of current prison policy and lack of gender sensitivity to female combatants.

It is by prioritising the voices of the women combatants in this article that it not only enables their re-positioning at the centre of the struggle, but also moves away methodologically from the more typical sole emphasis on structural conditions and political processes. Instead, prioritising the voices of the women combatants places the production of subjectivities and agencies at the centre, and explores their dialectical relationship to objective conditions and constraints.

It is clear from the voices of the female combatants and in their engagement in the research that the prison experience was marked specifically by assaults on their femininity, to which they were the more vulnerable due to the emphasis on sexual

modesty within their socialisation and within the ethno-nationalist iconography of femininity. The aggression directed against them seems, in part, to have been a form of gender-based sexual violence in direct retaliation for the threat posed to gender norms by their assumption of the (ostensibly more powerful) role as combatants. They countered this by methods which foregrounded their collective identity as soldiers and their identification with their male comrades in ‘the same struggle’.

The testaments of the Volunteers demonstrate that they are not merely victims of war, but are also agents of change through *policy impact* (Sharoni 2000). The ‘negotiated peace settlement in Northern Ireland may have stopped large-scale, indiscriminate use of violent force and terror ... [T]he violence that remains is much lower in intensity, is different in form from terrorism, and played by rules that try to ensure it is controlled enough to avoid destabilising political gains and the overall peace process’ (Brewer 2003, p. 2).

This article drawing on the voices and experiences of former female combatants in the Irish Conflict, illuminates key moments of physical and symbolic violence within a structure of domination (imprisonment). Thus the idea of coming to know ourselves differently and viewing the possibilities for transformation, is about interpreting ourselves differently.

The Foucauldian journey for these empirical investigations on ex-female Irish combatants in the Irish Conflict illuminates that being from how they are constituted as objects of knowledge, to how they are constituted as subjects of power/knowledge, allows the personal, experiential and imaginative space of resistance to physical and symbolic violence within a structure of domination (imprisonment).

A Foucauldian approach notes three types of struggle relevant to the female ex-combatants: against domination; against exploitation and against submission. To understand why particular institutions of power such as prisons enjoy more power than prisoner groups, as opposed to seeing power as a 'machine in which everyone is caught' (Foucault 1977), an account of resistance is needed and has been appropriated throughout this article. As Foucault (1977) views freedom as part of the exercise of power, he spoke of the reflexive and constant need to resist domination in everyday life and imprisonment is a systematic example of where former female ex-combatants engaged in diverse resistance practices to institutional power.

What makes a Foucauldian analysis of former female combatants of the Conflict so inspiring, is how the animation and location of problems of knowledge as 'pieces' of the larger contest between The State, institutions of power and its penal subjects (ex female combatants as prisoners). The paper has demonstrated that the body exists through and in culture, the product of signs and meanings, of discourse and practices.

The body is rooted in its material physicality (Smart, 1983, 44) and find, in Foucault's (1977) work, an insistence upon the reversibility of discourses through 'resistance'. Subjects of power are also 'agents' who can strategically mobilise disjunctures in discourses and in so doing, open up the world of possibility to be 'otherwise' in a world that seeks order through discipline and surveillance.

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